

Isaiah 11:1-10
Romans 15:4-13
Matthew 3:1-12

2nd Sunday of Advent, December 9, 2007
Pastor Wendy Moen
First Trinity Lutheran Church, Washington, DC

There were two big votes in our around the world this week.
In Russia – Vladimir Putin won an election that reviewers say
will maintain his hold and moral authority
in the country even after he steps down next year.
It even opens the possibility that he could run again for
president after sitting out at least part of the next presidential term.

In Venezuela, Hugo Chavez was denied the opportunity
to change his country's constitution which would have
removed term limits for presidents.

2 rulers hoping to continue their reign of influence and power.

In this country, there is much talk and following as
the presidential election heats up.
The candidates hope to be the winners in
the Iowa caucuses and New Hampshire primaries,
potentially giving them the push needed for
a path straight to the white house.

While each of the people running for office or
maneuvering for power, has their supporters,
I hardly think they are the ruler that
Isaiah talks about in the first reading today.
Yes, we hope that whoever wins in
our country or around the world will care for all people,
not just the rich and influential.
We pray that the rulers of all nations will
act in defense of the weak.
Sometimes there is sweeping change in the houses of congress;
sometimes there is groundswell of support for

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one candidate in hopes that they will be
'the one' that will fix the problems, the ills of our society.

But, I think most of us would agree that
even the candidate we are passionate about will have their flaws,
will be stymied by bureaucracy and will sacrifice
one of their heart-felt positions to
get something else they really want,
not to mention the ever-present potential for scandal and corruption.

Well, guess what – there is a history of problems when
humans are in positions of power.
When the people of Israel first had the idea for a king,
they were told it was a bad idea,
but they kept asking so God finally granted them their wish.
Have you ever tried to read 1st and 2nd Kings straight through –
time after time of rulers and God's people having strayed from God –
it's exhausting – and, from this side
you begin to understand how God let them be
overrun by the enemy from the north, west, south and east!

These prophecies of Isaiah are born from
hopelessness, frustration, fear;
born from a human ruler falling short –
born from reigns of inadequacies, short-sightedness,
injustice, corruption, and betrayal of God.

The prophets and people start hoping for a messiah that
will rule justly, with righteousness.
The words of Isaiah point to a leader,
a ruler, b/c that's what the people knew;

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that's how they understood God to act in history,
by assenting to victory over enemies if
the king and the people of Israel led faithful, righteous lives.
From the line of David will come one who will
rule with wisdom and insight;
with righteousness and faithfulness.
All of their hopes Isaiah spoke in these prophecies for
the One who would come to save the people of God.
This One shall heal all the breaches of harmony
from humans to animals to land.

Several hundred generations later, we can't get it right yet,
whether it's a king or president or DC government worker –
though perhaps we understand that we won't ever get it right
because we are humans.
From the office of president right down to the PTA,
humans are fallible, prone to mistakes and influence;
Sometimes our good fruit is covered in chaff.

We are not yet in the kingdom of heaven.
But God is at work among us already drawing us near.
John the Baptist, prophet of Advent brings us the Good News
"...the kingdom of heaven has come near."
In strong words of warning he tells us how to prepare.
He announces that the Anointed One is coming who will
prepare us for the kingdom of heaven.
John's voice rang out thousands of years ago to
hard-working people whose wages went to crooked tax collectors.
To people who felt the pressures from Roman rule and
society threaten their faithful living and faithfulness to God and Jewish laws.
John's voice rings out to hundreds then and now,

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calling us to repentance.

And in searching these verses,
it becomes clear that repentance is more than a one-time act. Repentance starts with an openness to a new way of living. Repentance is God taking hold of us and turning us to a new way of seeing, of acting in life, turning us to a new way of living.

The outcome, John says, will be the bearing of good fruit.
Turned by God the path of the LORD
to your heart becomes straight. Repent.
With a winnowing fork, you will be tossed up like the grains of wheat.
He will sort out the wheat –
that which bears fruit, from the chaff – that which does not.
Your sins He will winnow,
your fruit and your chaff will be separated.

And anyone who has worked with chaff –
from wheat, hay or straw, will tell you
that it's not easy to get clean after a day in the fields or in the barns.
The chaff seems to get into every nook and cranny of your ears,
into the folds of your clothing and only
a good washing and change of cloths will help you feel clean.

It's the same with the chaff of our lives –
the bad habits we would like to break,
the resentments, the walls of defense,
feeling we are not good enough for God to care
or that God has forgotten us.

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Chaff clings to eye glasses and kind of gets into your eyes
and makes it hard to see the nearness of the kingdom of heaven.

No dribbling of water will wash away this chaff.

No dainty splashing of water will
clean the chaff from behind our ears.

John's baptism is one of whole body dunking
where God's hands take you down deep,
hold you there, so you come up sputtering,
gasping for breath while the Spirit turns you to a new way of living.
The Spirit brings forth your fruit.

Prepare the royal highway; the king of kings is near!
Jesus comes again. Jesus comes again to rule with grace and mercy.

Prepare the royal highway; the king of kings is near!
Jesus comes again to winnow our souls,
to separate the fruit-bearing parts from our sinful self once and for all.

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing,
so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.